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## ARTICLE

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## **Examining opportunities for children to participate in formal early childhood music education**

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### **Abstract**

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), children's participation in cultural life and arts is of utmost importance. The ideas of children's equality and their right to participation are also emphasised in curricula and other policy programmes in many countries. Three decades after the signing of the CRC, however, there still appears to be a large gap between the policy programmes and their practical implementation in arts and culture education. Referring to previous findings in early childhood music research (Williams, 2018) and brain research (Tervaniemi, Tao and Huotilainen, 2018), the authors of this study—as both scholars and educators in music—investigate early childhood music education. This qualitative case study examines children's opportunities for participation in early childhood music education in four European countries (Estonia, Finland, Greece and Iceland). The data were collected through interviews, utilising some previous literature (Black-Hawkins, 2010; CRC, 2013; Ruismäki and Juvonen, 2009). According to a content analysis, the policy programmes appear to emphasise children's rights in music, but there are variations at the organisational level.

**Keywords:** Convention on the Rights of the Child, early childhood music education, participation, involvement, curriculum

## Introduction

In the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 31 recognises the right of the child to cultural life and the arts (CRC, 1989). Tay, Pawelski and Keith (2018) found that the arts and humanities generally support expression in many ways, but little research has been conducted on this topic. The CRC General Comment No. 7 (2005, p. 15) noted that in some countries, insufficient attention has been given to the implementation of Article 31, which guarantees 'the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (CRC, 1989). As Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie and Vandeveld (2012) noted, there may be a gap between the written policy programmes and reality. Along with Brattico and Pierce (2013), Huotilainen, Putkinen and Tervaniemi (2009) and Kangas (2016), the authors of the present study see children's ability to participate as active agents throughout their educational path as essential to their general development. The authors of this study are specialists in music education, which justifies the focus of the present study on this aspect of children's cultural and artistic participation. Children's right to equal participation is emphasised in CRC's General Comment No. 7 (CRC, 2005), and music is highlighted in General Comment No. 17 (CRC, 2013).

Numerous researchers have underlined the positive impact of music on development and well-being in early childhood, suggesting that children benefit from being provided with rich musical environments and engaged in musical experiences (Gordon, 2003; Hallam, 2010; Kelley & Sutton-Smith, 1987; Pugh & Pugh, 1998; Putkinen, Saarikivi and Tervaniemi, 2013; Stadler Elmer, 2012; Trehub, 2006). As Williams (2018) points out, recent evidence has demonstrated the positive effects of music—particularly on self-regulation skills—for musicians, including children. Similarly, Hallam *et al.* (2009) found that engaging with music may benefit individuals both psychologically and cognitively. According to Gudmundsdottir (2017, p. 7), '[t]here is strong evidence supporting the idea that infants are born musical or at least with a predisposition for becoming musical beings.' Furthermore, recent findings in brain research (Brattico and Pearce, 2013; Nieminen, Istók, Brattico and Tervaniemi, 2012; Tervaniemi, Tao and Huotilainen, 2018) and on the links between music and emotional knowledge (Vist, 2011), among others, support the importance of music education in early childhood. On the other hand, the primary values of music education, including self-growth, self-knowledge, musical enjoyment, flow and happiness, are also fundamental life values (Elliott, 1995). Additionally, as Henley (2017), Hennessy (2000), and Ruismäki and Tereska (2006) found, both positive and negative musical experiences in early childhood affect the music-studying processes of pre-primary and primary school student teachers. However, even previous positive experience or studies in music do not guarantee the pre-primary or primary school student teachers' confidence in teaching music if they have recently not had an active relationship with music (Wiggins and Wiggins, 2008).

The study relates to early childhood music education in Estonia, Finland, Greece and Iceland. This choice represents countries with different educational tradition and level: two of them are well-known for the high quality of music education as well as basic education (Estonia and Finland), and two not so particularly outstanding for quality education (Iceland and Greece) (see PISA 2015, 2018). Two of these countries represent the authors' native countries, while the other two belong to their network of early

childhood music education. In the General Comment No. 7, the CRC (2005) has proposed that early childhood be defined as under the age of eight, as the transition from preschool to school has already occurred by that age in most countries. In the current study, early childhood is limited to five- to eight-year-old children, for whom curricula for formal education and teacher education programmes have been developed in the studied countries (European Commission, 2019). Formal education, available to every citizen, was chosen as the studied context because it provides children with the most equal opportunities to participate. The national systems of education and learning environments, including teachers' pedagogical solutions, were noted; for example, as General Comment No. 17 (CRC, 2013, p. 22) emphasised that in addition to teachers, other organisers in the education systems should support children's artistic practices. The quotation from the General Comment including this information is included in the study design.

In a study of the framework of participation for primary and secondary schools, Black-Hawkins (2010) considered the entire learning environment. Referring to Reynaert and colleagues (2012), the authors are aware of the recommended connection between the research and the practical implications of the CRC. Therefore, the objective of the study is to find critical points in children's opportunities to participate in early childhood music education in different countries as their right to cultural life and the arts (CRC, 1989). Most of the challenges to each child's right to participate equally in early childhood music education appear to lie in the implementation of the national curricula in general. In Finland and Iceland, generalist pre-primary and primary teachers can teach every subject in the curricula. In Estonia and Greece, only teachers with special qualifications in music studies can teach music in early childhood education. The overall situation in these four countries was assessed by national experts in early childhood music education, who were interviewed to give us an indicative look to children's possibilities to participate in early childhood music education. From both the child and teacher perspectives, an intensive relationship with music as a requirement for participating in musical activities seems to be a significant challenge in all studied countries, which is in line with the results of Hietanen, Koironen and Ruismäki (2017). Based on the findings, this study offers ideas about developing participatory early childhood music education at all levels in European countries.

## **About participation**

Academically, participation has been defined in many ways. When considering children's rights to participate, the approach is often to notice all diverse children and their abilities to participate equally (e.g. Ainscow *et al.*, 2006; Black-Hawkins, 2010). The present study follows this broad definition, as it is based on the CRC (1989) and its General Comments, especially No. 17 (CRC, 2013), which defines children's rights to participate in a very broad sense. By 'all diverse children', the authors refer to Karagiannis, Stainback and Stainback (1996) and Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey (2010), who stated that every human being is different from others. In addition, in her framework for participation, Black-Hawkins (2010, p. 29) stressed participation; for example, each student's opportunity for learning should be active and collaborative for all, fostering the active right of members to 'join in' and impacting all members of a school and all aspects of school life.

In Väyrynen and Hietanen's (2018) study, primary school student teachers pointed out that in addition to activity, engagement and the opportunity to challenge themselves in their own ways should be integral elements in individual participation. Though it has been studied mainly in higher education contexts, it is significant that many scholars found students' participation and ability to participate were connected to engagement (Barrett, Everett and Smigiel, 2012; Hockings, Cooke and Bowl, 2007; Hood, 2012; Masika and Jones, 2016) and responsibility (Black-Hawkins, 2010; Hood, 2012). It is important to note that participation encompasses both the approach of attending or being involved and helping someone to participate (Väyrynen and Hietanen, 2018). In the current study, we focus on children's abilities to participate within a formally organised learning environment, as well as the pedagogy used in the environment (CRC, 2013).

### **Music education and participation**

As clarified in its General Comment No. 17 (CRC, 2013), music is addressed in Article 31 (CRC, 1989). In the comment, children are encouraged to reproduce, transform, create and transmit culture through, for example, creating their own songs. Participation in cultural and artistic activities is seen as necessary to help children understand foreign cultures (CRC, 2013), which requires from teachers sufficient competence in early childhood music, among their other cultural competences (Robinson, 2016). According to the General Comment No. 17 (CRC, 2013), learning environments should be active and participatory. In Väyrynen and Hietanen's (2018) study, primary student teachers differentiated activity from participation based on the presence of opportunities for the student to challenge and develop him- or herself musically.

According to McTavish, Streelasky and Coles (2012), teachers should carefully organise space for each child's voice. Supported by adults, children should be involved in exercising choice and autonomy through their imaginative engagement. For example, in making their own songs with peers, children create their own cultural knowledge (Barrett, 2006; CRC, 2013; Ruismäki and Juvonen, 2009). However, it is well known that at lower educational levels, music educators' competence in music and in teaching music varies widely, especially the competence of general pre-primary and primary teachers in teaching music (Burak, 2019; Hallam *et al.*, 2009; Hash, 2010; Holden and Button, 2006; Suomi, 2019; Thorn and Brasche, 2015; de Vries, 2013). Teacher knowledge and competence, both in music and in teaching music, appear to impact the versatility of the music education they provide (Biasutti, 2010; Hallam *et al.*, 2009; Hietanen *et al.*, 2017; Ilari, Moura and Bourscheidt, 2011; Ruismäki and Tereska, 2008; Suomi, 2019; Valenzuela and Codina, 2014). Involving every child in multiple musical activities requires that the teachers have a sufficient knowledge of and personal relationship with music, which enable competence, motivation and a feeling of ownership to teach music (Hietanen *et al.*, 2017; Ruismäki and Ruokonen, 2009; Suomi, 2019).

The findings regarding pre-primary and primary teachers' low competence in teaching music and the importance of music education are a concern; in Finland, for example, the number of compulsory music courses in pre-primary and primary teacher education programmes has dramatically decreased (Ruokonen *et al.*, 2017; Suomi, 2019). In some Finnish primary teacher education programmes, many kinds of blends (e-learning materials, peer-learning, video lessons, etc.) have been used in designing

blended music learning environments to help diverse student teachers participate in music studies in a way suitable for each participant (e.g. Hietanen and Ruismäki, 2017; Ruokonen and Ruismäki, 2016; Sepp *et al.*, 2019; Tuisku and Ruokonen, 2017). According to some previous findings, despite the offered support by e-materials and peer-learning for autonomous periods, student teachers still regularly ask for more face-to-face guidance to support their learning process (Enbuska, Hietanen and Tuisku, 2018; Hietanen, Enbuska, Tuisku, Ruokonen and Ruismäki, 2018; Ruokonen *et al.*, 2017).

To recognise the twentieth anniversary of the CRC (1989), Ruismäki, Ruokonen, and Juvonen (Ruismäki and Juvonen, 2009; Ruismäki and Ruokonen, 2009) asked pre-primary student teachers (N=90) to outline a 'child's legal right declaration in music,' based on the CRC (1989). Emphasising that children are active participants in musical situations, the student teachers' 'to do' list was formulated as follows:

1. Ensure that a child has a right to sing.
  2. Allow the child to find sounds in the surrounding environment, explore them and also notice the importance of silence.
  3. Find the emotion of the song and let the child feel safe through singing.
  4. Allow the child to make his or her own music and manifest it through movement.
  5. Allow the child to play a musical instrument.
  6. Help the child to find his or her own music.
  7. Permit the child to hear all kinds of music and learn to understand them.
  8. Let singing and playing music create experiences and memories for the child.
  9. Pass on the joy and delight of music-making to the child.
  10. Let music join children, parents, people, cultures and the world together
- (Ruismäki and Juvonen 2009, p. 155).

In the current study, the list has been used to remind us about pre-primary student teachers' interpretation of the CRC and their understanding of the early childhood music education situation and its needs ten years ago. It was also used at the beginning of the current study's interviews as inspiration for the experts.

## **Study design**

According to General Comment No. 17 (CRC, 2013, p. 22),

"[c]onsistent with obligations under Article 29 concerning the aims of education, appropriate time and expertise must be allocated within the school curriculum for children to learn, participate in and generate cultural and artistic activities, including music, drama, literature, poetry and art, as well as sports and games ... [a]ll professionals working with or for children, or whose work impacts on children (government officials, educators, health professionals, social workers, early years and care workers, planners and architects, etc.), should receive systematic and ongoing



training on the human rights of children, including the rights embodied in Article 31. Such training should include guidance on how to create and sustain environments in which all children can most effectively realise their rights under Article 31.”

Based on the CRC (1989, 2013) and previous studies, the present study considers how music education and music teacher education are organised in four European countries, especially concerning early childhood. The research question has been formulated as follows:

**RQ:** What are the opportunities for children’s equal participation in early childhood music education in four European countries?

This research question is answered in a qualitative case study. The study has the characteristics of an instrumental case study because the policy guidelines for children’s equal participation and its implementation are examined as carefully as the data allows, but the focus remains on children’s participation (Silverman, 2010; Stake, 1995).

Reynaert *et al.* (2012) pointed out a possible gap between the policy programmes and reality, which was addressed in General Comment No. 17 (CRC, 2013) to remind the organisers of their responsibility to implement the CRC (1989). In General Comment No. 17, the role of educators was emphasised, particularly their will and ability to offer space for children’s own kind of activities. Therefore, the present study uses two kinds of data. The first data include a thematic interview with an expert early childhood educator from each studied country. The interviews were carried out during the spring of 2019. The other data include policy guidelines from the studied countries that describe the curriculum for five- to eight-year-old children. Due to the various structures of the original curricula and the challenge of different languages, the last update of the National Educational System on the platform Eurydice, designed by the European Union (EU) (European Commission, 2019), has been used.

The authors wanted to map the general situation of children’s participation in some European countries, carrying out interviews with one teacher educator in early childhood music education as an expert from each country (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2009). It is typical, that using experts as key informants, only a small number of informants are interviewed (Kumar, 1989). Thus, four countries seemed to be a sufficient amount for this small scale study. As Estonia and Finland are the authors’ home countries, they were natural choices to take with, whereas Iceland and Greece were selected through the authors’ network. Despite of the fact that the Programme for international student assessment (PISA) does not focus on the arts education, the authors noticed, that in this widely reported international assessment both Estonia and Finland have been above the average in the OECD countries, while Iceland and Greece below it (PISA 2015, 2018).

The interviews consisted of two phases: first, as a ‘warm up’, the informants were asked to reflect on the student teachers’ previous ‘to do’ list (see previous section), considering the current situation in their country. The second phase was the semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) themselves, each lasting about 35–40 minutes. The type of interview was a combination of interview guide approach (i.e. the topic was specified in advance, in outline form) and semi-structured open-ended interview (i.e. the sequence of the questions was determined in advance, the basic questions



were asked in the same order), which enabled the interviewer to ask additional questions when needed (Patton, 1990). The basic questions focused on themes such as children's access to musical activities and education and teachers' competence in teaching music in early childhood education. The thematic questions were formulated to understand the implementations of the policy guidelines and educational environments concerning music education in early childhood in each country. All the interviews were recorded and transcription in 21 pages.

First, the data derived from the interviews, were analysed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). The experts evaluated and described the readiness of pre-primary and primary student teachers and in-service teachers in their own countries to enable children's opportunities for participation in music. While carrying out the analysis, there arose an interest in how teachers teaching music (in some countries music teachers) are educated in the examined countries. As there was not any possibility to carry out any complementary interviews, the details were completed by more precise information written in the curricula, education systems and policy guidelines shared in Eurydice (European Commission, 2019). When analysing the guidelines, the authors searched sentences that referred to allowing or supporting each child's right to participate and, if participation was limited, in what way it was revealed (Black-Hawkins, 2010). One example of the content analysis process is given as follows: 'Early childhood education is available to all children: All children in Estonia have the right to obtain high-quality early childhood education and local governments have the duty to ensure all children aged 1.5 to 7 years residing in their catchment area and whose parents so wish an opportunity to attend a preschool' (European Commission, 2019). This citation was reduced as 'Free general education for everyone'. Another example is taken from the policy guidelines in Iceland: there are several sentences describing the planned and goal-oriented entity of education, but also pointing out that 'the focus is on the overall well-being of the child' (European Commission, 2019). The wide definitions have been reduced as: 'Preschools take a holistic approach to educate children'.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Organisational opportunities for children's participation in music education*

In the first part of the study, children's opportunities to participate equally in early childhood music education were studied from the organisational aspect. The emphasis was on the key data based on different educational policy programmes, including the main features of curricula in European countries (European Commission, 2019).

| Parts of the system                                 | Estonia   | Greece  | Finland   | Iceland  |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Key features of the education system                | Free general education for everyone<br><br>Equal opportunities; moreover, increased participation in lifelong learning for everyone | Free education<br><br>All pupils have equal opportunities<br><br>Developing equal opportunities in education, thus reducing school dropouts | Free education<br><br>Equal opportunities for all<br><br>Differences between schools are small<br><br>Quality of teaching is high everywhere  | Preschools take a holistic approach to educate children<br><br>Basic elements include democracy and human rights, equality and creativity                            |
| Institutions organised for five- to eight-year-olds | Childcare institutions for three- to seven-year-olds<br><br>Basic schools (seven- to eight-year-olds)                               | Pre-primary schools (four- to five-year-olds)<br><br>Primary schools (six- to 12-years-old)   | Day-care institutions/ family day-care (zero- to six-year-olds)<br><br>Day-care institutions/ comprehensive schools (six- to seven-year-olds)<br><br>Comprehensive schools (seven- to 16-year-olds) | Pre-primary schools (five-year-olds)<br><br>Primary schools (six-year-olds)  |
| Teacher education                                   | Kindergarten teachers (BA/MA)<br><br>Class teachers (MA)<br><br>Music teachers (MA) teaching music                                  | Primary school teachers: four-year degree in a pedagogical department (higher education)<br><br>Special music courses before teaching music | Kindergarten teachers (BA/MA)<br><br>Class teachers (MA)<br><br>General teachers teaching music   | Pre-primary, compulsory and upper-secondary school teachers: a five-year course programme (300 ECTS). Mostly MA in education.<br><br>General teachers teaching music |

Table 1: The national educational systems for five- to eight-year-old children: Organisation and teacher education (European Commission, 2019).

| Parts of the curricula      | Estonia  | Greece  | Finland  | Iceland   |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| National curriculum         | <p>National Curriculum for Preschool Child Care Institutions (three- to seven-year-olds)</p> <p>National Curriculum for Basic Schools (seven- to 17-year-olds)</p>                                       | <p>The Pre-Primary School National Curriculum (four- to five-year-olds)</p> <p>Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education</p>   | <p>National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood and Care (zero- to seven-year-olds)</p> <p>National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (six- to seven-year-olds)</p> <p>National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (seven- to 16-year-olds)</p> | <p>National Curriculum Guide for Pre-primary Schools</p> <p>National Curriculum Guide</p>   |
| Participation in curriculum | <p>The child is an active participant in teaching and learning and takes pleasure in action</p> <p>Preschool child care institutions implement different child-centred and child-based methodologies</p> | <p>The pre-primary school work programme promotes the autonomy of children to learn how to coexist and cooperate, capitalising on their knowledge and skills associated with different cognitive fields</p> <p>The teacher creates the appropriate conditions for ensuring learning incentives and prerequisites for all children in an attractive, safe, friendly and stimuli-rich environment</p> | <p>I learn, I experience, I act, I participate, I play, I move, I explore, I express myself</p> <p>Part of transversal competence: participation and involvement</p> <p>Participation and building a sustainable future</p>                              | <p>Pre-primary schools:<br/>To lay the foundation necessary for children to become independent, autonomous, active and responsible participants in a democratic society</p> <p>Compulsory schools:<br/>To encourage pupils' general development and prepare them for active participation in a democratic society. The organisation is guided by, e.g. equality, democratic operation, responsibility and respect for human values. Compulsory schools organise their activities to correspond fully with the needs of their pupils and encourage the overall development, well-being and education of every individual</p> |
| Music in curriculum         | <p>Pre-primary school: music is included in curriculum with aims, content and outcomes.</p> <p>Comprehensive school: music is one of the subjects</p>  | <p>Pre-primary school: included in wider programmes, e.g. creation and expression</p> <p>Primary school: an independent part of arts education (visual arts, music, drama)</p>  | <p>Pre-primary school: In three of five objectives, music is mentioned as a concept with few sentences in forms of expression</p> <p>Comprehensive school: music is one of the subjects</p>  | <p>Pre-primary school: Schools should encourage children to express themselves in various ways: for example, through play, movement, visual arts, music, language, numbers and symbols</p>  |

Table 2: The national educational systems for five-to-eight-year-old children: Music and participation in the curricula (European Commission, 2019).

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the policy guidelines in every studied country emphasise children's right to grow as individuals, supported by and in connection with the people around them. Further, it can be said that the main contents of policy programmes concerning music education in the studied countries align with the aims of the CRC (1989).

When considering the national systems of formal education in the studied countries, it is easy to see that at lower levels of education, music is tightly connected to other arts and skills (European Commission, 2019). The EU website (2019) does not clearly state what educational qualifications are required for teaching music at the lowest levels of the education system, but to some extent, the interviewed experts revealed the requirements in their own countries.

#### *Teachers enabling children's participation in music education*

In addition to the curricula guidelines, children's opportunities to participate according to their needs, depend on their teachers' abilities to organise space for music education. As emphasised in the CRC (2013), both a quality teacher education and teachers implementing pedagogical solutions are integral in children's rights to equal participation. In Estonia, the education system and policy programmes support qualified music teachers throughout their education path. However, as the expert reveals, becoming a teacher at the preschool or other general education levels no longer interests many students.

"[Music education in early childhood] is very good and well designed, but not everything works out as nicely in real life. It is a part of the general education system. Music teachers have to provide special music education. [In the curriculum], music is connected with daily activities by a kindergarten teacher. Musical activities are also provided by a music teacher. All in all, there is a constant shortage of teachers, as this job is not too popular in Estonia: it is not particularly valued in the society." (Expert A/Estonia)

In Finland, as shown in the following quotation, pre-primary and primary student teachers vary greatly in their musical knowledge, skills and competence. Referring to Hietanen *et al.* (2017), Ruismäki and Ruokonen (2009) and Suomi (2019), encouraging every child to participate in many-sided musical activities requires that teachers have sufficient personal and active contact with music, which requires time and strong support.

"We have a system in which music education is part of the curriculum in early childhood education. They can participate in music activities in day-care centres and preschools—the generalist teacher is responsible for teaching all—actually, we don't have any subject-oriented pedagogy in early childhood and preschool. It's a more holistic way of approaching education—we don't teach any subjects. [In teacher training programmes,] they [the candidates] are selected not for their abilities or skills in music, but by other criteria. That's why the groups are very different. Many of them have a great potential to develop [themselves in teaching music], but they have not had enough lessons to develop music during their studies." (Expert B/Finland)

The student teachers may also know the material but not possess sufficiently in-depth knowledge to involve all children equally, especially refugee children (Robinson, 2016).

“They [the pre-primary student teachers] mainly have a narrow knowledge of different music styles and cultures. Participation, engagement and belongingness in culturally rich music—this allows you to show your voice as a part of your society. Our country is increasingly more multicultural. We need music education to be more open to other cultures. Music teachers should realise that they have to change something. We should not just listen to popular songs. Listening to their own culture’s songs is important to refugees. They can also feel belongingness in another country.” (Expert C/Greece)

As Reynaert and colleagues (2012) have pointed out, the data show a gap between the policy guidelines and reality, at least in Finland and Greece. For example, in Finland, the diversity in primary student teachers’ musical skills, knowledge and competence is significant, which creates challenges for their music teaching (Hietanen *et al.*, 2017; Suomi, 2019). When a student teacher comes to the teacher education programme with little skill, knowledge or competence in music, it is an enormous challenge to achieve sufficient confidence in music teaching through the small number of music lessons in general teacher education (Author 1 and Author 3, 2017; Biasutti, 2009; Hallam *et al.*, 2009; Hietanen *et al.*, 2017). Without a sufficiently active relationship with music, recently graduated preschool or primary school teachers may even develop fear around teaching music (Ruismäki and Tereska, 2008), as described in the following quotation from an expert teaching in Greece:

“In the curriculum, you can find all these points. These are important, but not implemented in the real curriculum. In reality, kindergarten teachers are not willing to sing—they take music from YouTube, and they are afraid of their own voices. There are instruments in the classroom, but the teachers don’t use them. The teachers are often not very skilful in playing themselves.” (Expert C/Greece)

In almost all the studied four countries, music in pre-primary education is not clearly defined as an independent subject, but instead as part of arts education. Combining music too closely with the other arts, may challenge children’s opportunities to notice and develop their participation in music, especially if the teacher has only a low competence in music (Abril, 2019). This approach seems somewhat obvious in the following quotation from Iceland:

“Musical approaches to early childhood education should not be considered as a hobby for small children but as one of the main methods to bring about and support healthy development. In the most recent [curriculum for preschool], there is more general talk about creativity in all the arts, but there is no special mention of the importance of music. I don’t think so; there is no law that secures music education in early childhood.” (Expert D/ Iceland)

In the policy programmes in each studied country, there are clear recommendations for practical implementations in children’s equality and right to participate in music, either as an independent subject or as an independent part of various holistic entities, especially in the lowest levels. However, according

to the interviewed experts in early childhood education, it seems that without a sufficiently personal relationship with music apart from what is taught in formal general education, the general pre-primary teachers and primary teachers lack sufficiently competence to enable each child's equal participation in music (Biasutti, 2009; Hallam *et al.*, 2009; Hietanen *et al.*, 2017; Ruismäki and Ruokonen, 2009; Suomi, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

As Reynaert and colleagues (2012) have pointed out, there seems to be a gap between the policy programmes and their practical implementation. Part of it may be caused by the administrative authorities who are sharing resources for schools. Nonetheless, this issue was not examined in the present study, which focused on the information the interviewees wanted to share about early childhood music education in their countries, and was complemented by the authors with the written policy recommendations. Referring to Ruismäki's and Tereska's (2006) study about the influences of early childhood musical experiences to student teachers' self-concept in music, it has to be acknowledged, that versatile music education in schools requires versatile music education throughout the educational path of the teacher responsible for music in schools. According to some previous findings, before their teacher education, engaging in music as a hobby is a significant indicator of the student teachers' abilities to achieve competence in teaching music (Henley, 2017; Hennessy, 2000; Ruismäki and Tereska, 2006; Suomi, 2019). However, if student teachers' relationships with and activities in music have been minimal and they lack musical knowledge, they cannot help their pupils participate equally in music education. To guarantee children's equal rights to participate in early childhood music education, this study raises questions: should music tests be added to the aptitude tests required in pre-primary and primary teacher education to confirm that the student teachers possess basic skills and knowledge in music upon starting their teacher education? Should music courses be added throughout the education system, including pre-primary and teacher education? Or should only special music teachers be allowed to teach music, as in the Greek and Estonian systems?

Given the low number of informants interviewed, the small number of countries studied, and the differences in curriculum information shared on the Eurydice platform (European Commission, 2019), the findings of this study cannot be generalised. The experts were asked to share their assessment of the typical situation in their respective countries; their answers are not meant as representations of every pre-primary or primary teacher education programme in the country. However, the similarities in the results despite the differences among the countries' education systems—including those of early childhood music education—may be a sign that the results can be seen as indicative.

Future studies, referring to Wiggins and Wiggins (2008), might give a survey to pre-primary and primary teachers, focusing on their feelings and understanding regarding teaching versatile music and enabling each children's participation in multiple musical activities. An international research study could focus on the effects of pre-primary and primary school teachers' abilities to organise participatory music learning environments, comparing countries where generalists teach music with the countries where specialist music teachers are responsible for all music education. In connection with Abril's (2019)

findings, possible differences in children's learning to understand music as a phenomenon when music is taught as an independent subject or as a part of the arts in general should also be studied further.

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